

Global Hot Topics

Visa liberalization: A positive step in the EU-Turkey roadmap

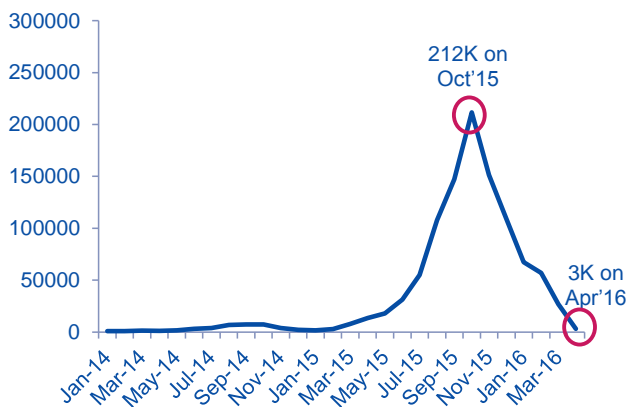
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The European Commission (EC) recommended today the Visa Liberalization for Turkish Citizens. Despite not all, but most, the requirements were fulfilled and the EC gave finally the green light. Thus, the most dramatic refugee crisis that Europe faces in near history led Turkey and the EU to cooperate on the issue of containing the social consequences of the migration from Syria. This green light is part of the roadmap of the Turkish-EU agreement signed last March. In this, Turkey accepted to be the main host of the refugees and asked financial assistance and visa free travel for its citizens. Given the success of the migrants swap plan, the visa liberalization was finally recommended by the EC. However, this is still just a recommendation and the final decision should be confirmed by the European leaders and the European parliament.

The EU Commission gave a green light

Monthly Arrivals to Greek Islands

Source: UNHCR& BBVA Research



Turkey-EU handshake for visa free travel is one of the most valued criteria for Ankara in the so-called refugee deal to curb refugee flows to Greece. The refugee deal has been put in action as of March 20, 2016 and it is proved to be effective so far. In fact, since the swap migrant plan was implemented, the number of total refugees migrated to Greek islands from Turkey decreased to 3K on April from 212K on October. Although NATO mission to contain illegal migration traffic in the Aegean Sea has been also supporting, the main reason behind the dramatic decrease to lower levels has its roots in the deal.

Therefore, and despite the fact that Turkey has **not yet fulfilled 5 criteria out of 72** in order to be approved into visa-liberated regime, the EC recommended the liberalization of visas to Turkish citizens. Yet, the EC

asked for urgent fulfillment of the remaining benchmarks (adopting the measure to prevent corruption, aligning the legislation on personal data protection with EU standards, concluding an operational cooperation agreement with Europol, offering effective judicial cooperation in criminal matters to all EU Member States, revising the legislation and practices on terrorism in line with European standards).

The maintenance of the EU-Turkey deal continues to be a key security issue as the summer is coming and the Aleppo situation is becoming critical again.

... but there are more bridges to cross

The approval of the liberalization by the EC is just a recommendation in EU legal terms although could mean a turning point in the EU-Turkey relationship. Despite this, there are some difficulties ahead as **the visa liberalization needs a dual approval by the leaders and the European Parliament to be in full effect as of July:**

European Leaders' Decision: Turkey can urge the EU leaders to approve visa free travel for Turkish citizens more easily than the European Parliament. It would be no surprise that many European leaders **especially, German Chancellor Merkel** whose popularity increases with decreasing refugees, would support Turkey's case.

The European Parliament's Decision needs more attention: Criticisms on Turkey's progress in terms of EU criteria could overshadow the parliamentary decision. The pro-visa free travel votes should reach at least 55% of the overall votes and they should also represent 65% of the overall EU population at the same time, i.e. **16 countries out of 28 should say 'Yes'**. No country has power to veto in the European Parliament. Alas, Turkey's record in human rights and press freedom could be binding. Moreover, Turkish Parliament's recent attempt to lift Kurdish MPs' immunity would be another roadblock in the European Parliament's voting session of the visa free travel. **Turkey's domestic agenda should be closely monitored in terms of the fate of visa liberalization and the refugee deal.**

.... Summing Up

Although just in the form of a recommendation, the latest decision from the EC continues to support the roadmap of the EU-Turkey refugee deal since last March. Still there some challenges ahead, but if the positive news are confirmed (and reinforce with some other positive news come from Cyprus) markets would start to price the new Turkey-EU relationship more seriously.

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